

# **The “Hot Mess of Harmfulness”: When Imposter Syndrome Holds Back High- Achieving Professionals**

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We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

**Access and Inclusion**

and

**Civility and Respect**

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

*“The more you know,  
the more you know you don’t know...”  
Aristotle*

# Agenda

- Introduction
- The Cycle of Imposter Syndrome
- Signs of Imposter Syndrome
- 5 Types of Imposter Syndrome
- Imposter Syndrome in Context
- Imposter Syndrome as Competitive Advantage

# What is 'Imposter Syndrome'?

- Originally termed 'Imposter Phenomenon' in 1978
- A persistent belief that one's success is undeserved, that achievement is due to luck or a mistake
- Fear that it will be revealed that one is a 'fraud', and undeserving of position, praise, role, pay

# Characteristics of Imposter Syndrome

- Self-doubt
- Sabotaging own success
- Undervaluing contributions
- Low self-esteem
- Fear of failure
- Overworking
- Not accepting recognition for achievements
- Comparing self to others

# Who has 'Imposter Syndrome'?

- Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor
- Award-winning Actor Tom Hanks
- Top Athlete Serena Williams
- Musician Billie Eilish
- Former First Lady Michelle Obama
- Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg
- Award-winning Actress Emma Watson
- CEO of Starbucks Howard Schultz





# Who had Imposter Syndrome?

- Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Steinbeck
- Artist/Painter Leonardo da Vinci
- Nobel Laureate Maya Angelou
- President George Washington
- Inventor/Genius Albert Einstein



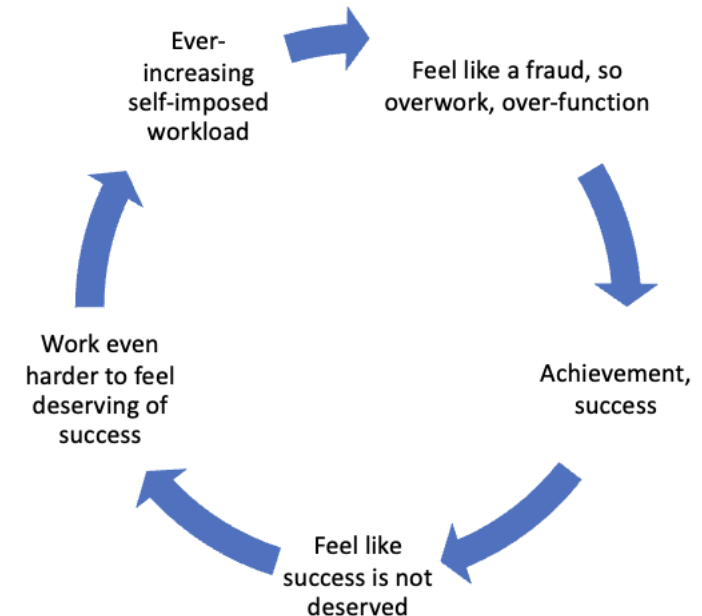


# Who else has ‘Imposter Syndrome’?

- Most commonly seen in highly intelligent, driven individuals who choose challenging jobs and fast-paced work environments
- Over 70% of people will report feeling imposter syndrome at some point in their careers
- A 2014 study found that it was the top fear of successful executives, with 60% saying it negatively impacted their careers in some way
- Individuals from minoritized groups may be more likely to experience imposter syndrome
- Term first used to describe feelings among female graduate students in the 1990s (Oberlin College)

# The Imposter Syndrome Cycle

1. Concerns about own competence drive overwork, over-functioning to prove oneself
2. Hard work leads to achievement, success
3. Feel that success is not deserved, perhaps due to luck or a mistake
4. Work even harder to feel deserving of success
5. Ever-increasing workload results in perfectionism (never good enough), procrastination, dread, burnout



# Caught in the Imposter Syndrome Cycle

- Respond negatively/passively to positive feedback
  - “It’s not that big of a deal”
  - “I really didn’t do that much”
  - “I was in the right place at the right time”
- Disregard compliments; may be off-putting to someone who is trying to connect; lose the relational component of positive feedback
- Becomes a conditioned response to discredit one’s achievements
- Block self from internalizing self-credit
- May result in perfectionism (impossible standards)
- May foster dependence on recognition, positive reinforcement
- May result in procrastination, dread, burnout, anxiety, depression

# Signs of Imposter Syndrome

- An inability to internalize achievements and downplaying accomplishments
- A fear of being “found out” or being exposed as inexperienced or untalented
- Avoidance of feedback
- A reluctance to ask for help, reluctance to delegate work, projects
- Turning down new opportunities
- Second-guessing decisions
- Overworking to the point of burnout to prove you’re “enough”
- Failing to start or finish projects

-- Wilding 2019

# Types of Imposter Syndrome



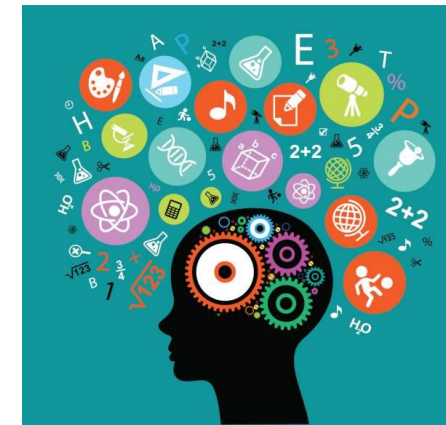
The Perfectionist



The Expert



The Soloist



The Natural Genius



The Superhuman

# The Perfectionist

Primary focus: “how” something is done



Perfectionism

Problem: Exceedingly high standards that may be impossible to achieve

Negative result: Fuels perfectionism, burnout, low-self-esteem



# The Perfectionist (2)

## Signs

- You micromanage everything
- You don't/won't delegate tasks
- You obsess over little details
- You struggle with decision-making
- You have high standards and unrealistic expectations
- You have an incredible fear of failure or making a mistake

## Strategies

- Give yourself a 'reality check' with a cost-benefit analysis of what perfectionism costs you in terms of time and energy
- Relax your standards and recognize effort and "good enough"
- Focus on your strengths instead of just your deficits
- Make friends with the discomfort and humanity of imperfection



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Problem: you have specialized knowledge and skills others do not

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# The Expert (2)

## Signs

- You feel like you need to master every step in the process
- You feel like you need to constantly pursue training and certifications
- You feel like a fraud despite your expertise
- You struggle with procrastination because you feel overwhelmed

## Strategies

- Seek out opportunities for growth and learning to boost your confidence
- Create a support system where you can be vulnerable and share struggles and setbacks and feel understood and supported
- Keep a journal or list of your accomplishments and progress to boost your self-esteem

# The Soloist

Primary focus: “who” completes the task



Problem: must do everything yourself, asking for help is a sign of weakness

Negative result: isolation and loneliness, overwhelm, martyr syndrome

# The Soloist (2)

## Signs

- You firmly feel like you need to accomplish things on your own
- You may identify as a 'rugged individualist'
- You feel incompetent if you need to ask for help or collaboration
- You struggle to network with others
- You have difficulty accepting constructive criticism from others

## Strategies

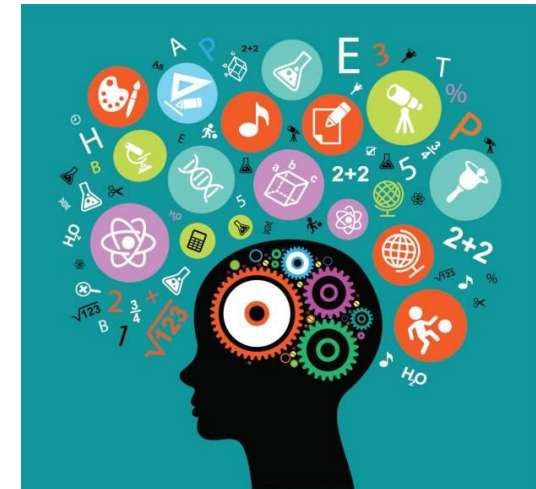
- Seek to identify the root cause of why you feel you must be independent and explore that
- Build a support network of people whose opinions matter to you and practice networking and collaboration
- Learn to delegate, starting with smaller projects and working with the discomfort and uncertainty
- Practice self-compassion and celebrate your successes

# The Natural Genius

Primary focus: “how” and “when” accomplishments happen

Problem: unrealistic expectations of your abilities, feel like a fraud when you fail

Negative result: negative self-talk



# The Natural Genius (2)

## Signs

- Success has come easily to you in the past
- Your self-confidence suffers considerably when faced with a setback
- You believe success comes from inherent ability, not hard work
- You have very high standards for yourself
- You are critical of perceived obstacles that could impede your future success

## Strategies

- Remind yourself that success is the result of hard work, practice, and opportunity.
- Use self-reflection to interrupt and redirect critical negative self-talk
- Take a realistic view of your abilities by asking a mentor to help you identify your strengths and challenges
- Consider yourself to be a work in progress, same as others

# The Superhuman

Primary focus: “how many” roles you can play

Problem: wanting to do more, never enough

Negative result: incredible pressure to excel in all roles, very self-critical





# The Superhuman (2)

## Signs

- You don't handle constructive criticism well
- You feel stressed when you're not working
- You feel guilty when taking breaks or enjoying leisure time
- You put a lot of pressure on yourself to perform at your best

## Strategies

- Recognize that doing well at everything is not a realistic goal
- Remember that everyone experiences mistakes and failures
- Acknowledge personal strength and hard work
- Allow time for self-care and relaxation and reflection
- Remember that productivity and self-worth are not inherently linked

# Imposter Syndrome in Context

There is considerable theoretical and conceptual support for the notion that imposter syndrome (or phenomenon) is a context-dependent as it is personal.

[Contextualizing the Imposter “Syndrome”, by Feenstra, Begeny, Ryan, Janka, Stoker and Jordan](#)

*“...when things are stripped of context, they can easily become pathologizing.”*

*- Brene Brown*

# Imposter Syndrome in Context

## Personal Lens:

- Imposter Syndrome
- Centers problem in individual, psychological
- Diagnostic
- Psychological dysfunction in individual
- Medical model
- Origin and cure = personal responsibility
- May reinforce 'victim blaming'

## Contextual/Environmental Lens:

- Imposter Phenomenon
- Centers problem in environment, cultural, structural
- Systemic
- Psychological response to dysfunction in environment
- Social/Environmental model
- Origin and cure = social responsibility
- May reinforce social change

# Imposter Syndrome in Context - Societal Level

- A person's position in social hierarchies plays a role in defining and perpetuating feelings of fraud and incompetence
- People in minority, non-dominant groups are subject to persistent negative stereotyping, differential treatment, microaggressions, etc.
- Ex: a woman may have heightened insecurity entering a leadership position because of pervasive social indicators that male traits lend themselves to better leadership styles
- Ex: an ethnic minority may be aware of stereotypes of their ethnicity including laziness or low achievement, and feel they must be more productive than others to prove themselves in their role

# Imposter Syndrome in Context - Institutional-Level

- Features within corporate, educational, or government institutions play an important role in shaping feelings of fraud or incompetence
- Social structures within the university reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes that feed imposter syndrome
- Ex: women and minorities may be under-represented in higher administration positions and over-represented in junior positions and middle-management, making them question promotions to higher-level positions

# Imposter Syndrome in Context - Institutional-Level continued

- Ex: women and ethnic minorities may traditionally and historically be paid less than white men for the same position, making it more difficult for them to ask for the same pay their white, male counterparts receive and expect
- Ex: women may be under-represented in certain positions (ex: information technology) and over-represented in others (ex: human resources), leading women in these roles to question their placement and fit, i.e. “question their place” within the institution



# Imposter Syndrome in Context – Interpersonal Level

- How people are treated in everyday interactions plays a large role in self-perception and self-evaluation
- Everyday interactions are laced with important social-evaluative cues that convey messages of whether one person sees another as having value and worth
- These cues ultimately play a role in self-appraisal and may foster imposter syndrome
- Individuals may very well feel like imposters when they are treated in ways that suggest that they don't deserve to be in their position or suggest that they are incompetent in some way

# Imposter Syndrome in Context – Interpersonal Level continued

- Ex: institutional-level decisions are made without the input of a person who has specific knowledge and expertise related to the subject area, resulting in them questioning why their opinion is/was not sought
- Ex: institutional-level decisions are made that don't take into consideration how they will affect a specific group of people on campus, leading those people to wonder why they are not valued members of the campus community
- Others?

# Discussion

What are some ways in which higher education campuses perpetuate imposter syndrome for employees?

What are some ways in which higher education campuses perpetuate imposter syndrome for students?

“What’s less explored is why imposter syndrome exists in the first place and what role workplace systems play in fostering and exacerbating it in women.”

-Tulshyan and Burey

Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome – Harvard Business Review 2021

# Imposter Syndrome as a Competitive Advantage

Five ways to harness imposter syndrome to your advantage

- Foster a workplace of psychological safety
- Show what it means to work like a human
- Recognize people's accomplishments
- Utilize feedback for development
- Create a culture of inclusion

(Wilding 2019)

# Foster a workplace of psychological safety

- Admit you don't have all the answers
- Have open discussions about how self-doubt accompanies success
- Discuss past mistakes without shame or guilt
- Model resilience by persisting in the face of adversity

# Show What it Means to Work like a Human

- Promote well-being and work/life balance
- Have open discussions about perfectionism, overworking, and burnout
- Show empathy and compassion
- Ensure employees take lunches, vacations, breaks, etc.
- Focus on employee engagement



# Recognize People's Accomplishments

- Point out effort and not just achievement
  - “You worked really hard on this.”
- Create a “brag file” and log employee “wins” to accompany success
- Celebrate incremental progress and not just completion or obvious results
- Ask employees what recognition feels good to them

# Utilize Feedback for Development

- Empower teams through feedback
- Make sure expectations are clear and understood
  - “Paint ‘done’ for me”
- Use strengths inventories, feedback loops, growth-oriented exercises

# Create a Culture of Inclusion

- Create space for candid conversations
  - No interruptions
  - Everyone has equal time to speak
  - Acknowledge mistakes, wins, and opportunities to develop and grow
- Promote mentoring, collaborations, sponsorships

How will YOU integrate some of these ideas  
in your office, on your campus, etc.?

Other ideas?

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**Thank you for attending!**

# Session Evaluation



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Thank you for attending!